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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 KABUL 003774

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DEPT FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR AHARRIMAN
OSD FOR MSHIVERS
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A, CG CJTF-81 POLAD

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SUBJECT: UNITED FRONT SETS ITS SIGHTS ON PRESIDENCY AND
CONSTITUTION

REF: A. KABUL 919

[1](#)B. KABUL 3767

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Looking ahead to the 2009 presidential and 2010 parliamentary elections, the newly-formed United Front is working to market itself as a mainstream pan-Afghan opposition party offering positive alternatives to what it characterizes as Karzai's failed leadership and policies. The United Front's Northern Alliance roots (Ref) are reflected in its leadership, including former President Rabbani, Wolesi Jirga Speaker Qanooni, First Vice President Massoud, and former jihadist MP Sayed Mustafa Kazimi (party spokesman, who was among those MP's killed in the November 6 Baghlan bombing). There is less cohesion within the leadership than the party's public message suggests, and there are questions about whether the group will hold together. President Karzai's willingness to cut deals with key players works against its unity. Rabbani is reportedly open to the idea of returning to the folds of the government. Qanooni covets the Afghan presidency but reportedly recognizes it is beyond the reach of a Tajik. Party insiders confirm that the United Front's agenda supports constitutional change to a parliamentary system (with a Tajik prime minister) and elected governors. The Front also supports continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Constitutional change requires a loya jirga which would be almost impossible without presidential support, leaving the United Front searching for a willing Pashtun flag-bearer. The only Pashtun being discussed is Mustafa Zahir, grandson of the late king, who is a member of the United Front but would be unlikely to deliver the Pashtun vote. The Palace reports Iran acknowledges providing support; others claim Russia, India and Pakistan are providing support to individuals if not the party itself. End Summary.

Legacy, Leadership, Membership and Outreach

[1](#)2. (C) The United Front (also referred to as the National Front) was formed earlier this year by several former jihadi commanders with former President Rabbani's active support (Ref A). Recognizing the need to move beyond being perceived as simply the Northern Alliance recycled, the party is

marketing itself as a multi-ethnic effort with pan-Afghan appeal and aspirations. The party nevertheless remains dominated by former Northern Alliance personalities and parties working in an uneasy relationship. These include Rabbani (Jamiat-I-Islami); Wolesi Jirga Speaker Qanooni (Hezb-I-Afghaniane-Naween); MP and Party Spokesman Sayad Mustafa Kazimi (Tajik Shia, Parwan, Minister of Commerce during Interim Government with close ties to Iran, who was among those killed in the Nov 6 Baghlan bombing); and the faction of the Hezb-I-Wahdate-I-Milli-I-Islami led by Mohammad Akbari, member of parliament from Dai Kundi. The current alliance is reportedly often tense as Rabbani is determined to keep hold of the reins even as Qanooni pushes for a larger role, both within the United Front itself and nationally.

¶3. (C) The United Front uses a Leadership Council to develop a unified strategy and message, impose discipline, and reach out to senior figures and small parties beyond those in the core group. According to a member, the council meets at least bi-weekly to discuss policy and reach agreement on party positions. Dissenting members are reported sworn to support the agreed party line.

¶4. (SBU) Senior Northern Alliance figures and ex-warlords or their proxies form the core of the Leadership Council. Besides Rabbani and Qanooni, the core group includes Second Vice President Khalili (who seems satisfied to work behind the scenes). First Vice President Ahmad Zia Massoud, publicly denies being on the council, but reportedly regularly attends Leadership Council meetings and is described as deeply involved in decision-making. Members of parliament who are part of the council include: Mohammad

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Asim (Tajik, Baghlan, Member of the Interim Government); Helaluddeen Helal (Tajik, Baghlan, former top Massoud Commander); Fazal Karim Aimaq (Aimaq, Kunduz, very close to Rabbani); Salih Mohammad Registani (Tajik, Panjshir, was Political Advisor to Massoud, close to Iran); Haji Mohammad Almas (Tajik, Parwan, VP Massoud loyalist understood to have financial ties to Dubai); Hameedullah Tokhi (Tokhi, Zabul); Faizullah Zaki (Uzbek, Jowzjan, Dostum surrogate -- not to be confused with Sebghatullah Zaki, also Uzbek, who was among those killed in the November 6 Baghlan bombing); and Mohammad Shakir Kargar (Uzbek, Faryab, 2nd Vice President in Interim Government, also close to Dostum). Despite attempts to draw in more, the only woman on the council is MP Qadria Yazdan Parast (Tajik, Kabul).

¶5. (C) General Dostum is not a member of the Leadership Council, but he is in close contact with the leadership and works in the Council through his proxies MPs Mohammad Shakir Kargar and Faizullah Zaki (above), even as he remains in contact with the Palace. The Leadership Council has reportedly reached out to Sayyaf and Mohaqqueq, former warlords turned senators, but neither has committed to joining, reportedly preferring instead to encourage both President Karzai and the United Front continue to bid for their support. Karzai is reportedly reaching out Sayyaf and Mohaqqueq as well as Rabbani.

¶6. (C) The council's only woman member, MP Parast (described as a liberal who has spent considerable time in The Netherlands) told Poloff that her goal was to either cause Karzai to change his policies or ensure he faces a strong challenge in the next election. She applauded the United Front's efforts to reach out to new groups. She used herself as an example, saying she had been recently tasked to encourage female MPs from the southern provinces to join the front. She described the group's established leadership and growing geographic and ethnic diversity as its greatest strengths, but acknowledged divisions within the leadership stemming from experiences during the years of clashes, ethnic difference, and competing egos make it hard to hold the movement together.

¶7. (C) The Leadership Council has deliberately reached out to Pashtuns. Pashtun MP's on the council include: Mohammad Farahi (Farah); Haji Habibullah Jan (Kandahar); Noorulhaq Olumi (Kandahar); Sayed Mohammad Gulabzoy (Khost); and Haji Ameer Lalai (Kandahar). This represents a mix of individuals disappointed that they are not part of Karzai's circle and former communists alledged to be receiving support from Moscow. Mustafa Zahir, the grandson of recently deceased King Zahir, is the most important Pashtun recruit. He joined the United Front despite President Karzai's appeals that he not do so, and both he and his family underline that he speaks only for himself.

Strategy and Platform

¶8. (C) Party strategists understand that overcoming the perception that the United Front is simply a recycled Northern Alliance requires more than just holding the core together and reaching out for new recruits. They are actively marketing the party as an alternative to what they portray as Karzai's failed leadership and policies, particularly relating to development, security, and corruption. They accuse Karzai of having brought Afghanistan to crisis.

¶9. (C) Prior to his death in the November 6 Baghlan bombing, party spokesman Kazimi fielded international queries and effectively delivered the agreed public message: we support the constitution and existing institutions; we support dialogue but are committed to better, more responsive government; and we support continued U.S. and international presence in Afghanistan. Aware that the U.S. would not welcome calls for a reexamination of the constitution, Kazimi had assured PolOff that the United Front leadership does not intend to risk a contentious and time-consuming attempt to

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redraft the constitution. He asserted that the leadership understood that Afghanistan's recovery from decades of war is still too tentative to support structural changes to the government.

¶10. (SBU) Former governor of Kapisa (and wealthy construction contractor) Abdul Sattar Murad, who has been described as Rabbani's advisor/financial manager, provided a more layered message in a separate meeting. He began with assurances that the United Front supports dialogue with the government and is committed to "playing by the rules." He underlined party support for a continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan. He stressed that the United Front's primary concern is to address the damage being done by what he described as Karzai's weak leadership and policy failures. He characterized Afghanistan as a country in crisis, adding that, after all that the Northern Alliance has sacrificed to save Afghanistan from the Taliban, its leadership was understandably not willing to be shut out of decision-making and simply watch things fall apart. He accused Karzai of acting "more like a king than a president" and outlined the justification for constitutional change to bring about a parliamentary system with a Pashtun president and Tajik prime minister.

¶11. (SBU) Murad, whom Karzai removed as Kapisa governor earlier this year after he had published a scathing critique of the government, confirms that constitutional change remains a United Front priority. This reflects the belief that president-prime minister combination would be a better vehicle that Karzai's 'unity government model' for incorporating and balancing Pashtun-Tajik interests. The party's vision is for a Pashtun president which would have an oversight (the description sounded more like a figurehead) role and a Tajik prime minister who would be responsible for actually running the government. Murad volunteered both that

constitutional change would require presidential support and the long odds against a non-Pashtun being elected president. Invited to identify the United Front's most likely candidate for the 2009 presidential election, he offered the late King's grandson, Mustafa Zahir, as a possibility.

¶12. (C) Shukria Barakzai, a moderate Pashtun MP close to Karzai, told us that Murad's description of the United Front's agenda was accurate -- as far as it went. She underlined the importance of Iran's support for and influence on the United Front, claiming that the Iranians are pressing hard for constitutional change in order to introduce in Afghanistan not just a prime minister but also a ruling council to surround the president. She asserted that a constitutional loya jirga could be triggered based on a vote of two-thirds of both houses of parliament, claiming that this helps explain Iran's effort to encourage tensions between parliament and the president. She reiterated claims made in earlier meetings that the Iranians are providing stipends to a significant number of MPs. Her view was that Teheran would prefer not to have to wait for a more willing (Pashtun) president to push for a loya jirga and constitutional change.

¶13. (C) UNAMA underlines that much of the constitution is open to interpretation, but disagrees with Barakzai's claim that a loya jirga can be triggered by a simple two thirds vote of both house of parliament. Their assessment is that it would be very difficult to hold a loya jirga without presidential support. They agree that Iran is investing in the United Front (including bidding for parliamentarians on behalf of the United Front) and enjoys considerable leverage. They also note that not all United Front members are sympathetic to Iran's agenda. Deputy SRSG Chris Alexander highlights that most within the Council strongly support the continued presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Likely Candidate for President

¶14. (C) Short-term ambitions and long-term party strategy will be factors in any decision about who the United Front

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candidate will be in the 2009 presidential elections. Rabbani reportedly is satisfied serving as king-maker and is not expected to be a candidate. Speaker Qanooni, who covets the presidency and reportedly irritates Rabbani, nevertheless understands the odds against a non-Pashtun being elected so reportedly has his eyes set on becoming prime minister under a revised constitution. Murad's mention of Mustafa Zahir's as a possible candidate may have been to test our response, but it is the only Pashtun name consistently cited. Mustafa's weak links to the traditional Pashtun tribal structure (and the fact that he does not speak Pashtu) point to the odds against his being able to deliver the Pashtun votes needed to win an election. His candidacy would nevertheless highlight Karzai's eroded support even among Pashtuns.

Funding

¶15. (C) United Front members deflect questions about rumors that the party is receiving funds from Iran, Russia, India and/or even Pakistan. Deputy National Security Advisor Ibrahim claimed on several occasions that the Iranians earlier this year acknowledged they were funding the United Front, reportedly justifying the action as necessary to counter Taliban influence, given the Afghan government's failure to provide an adequate defense (Ref B). Shukria Barakzai goes further, characterizing Iran as the "architect and developer of the United Front project." Several United Front members, including Qanooni, Rabbani, and Kazimi, are

rumored to have strong personal and financial ties with Iran. Qanooni and others are alleged to also receive personal funds from Russia.

Putting the United Front in Context

¶16. (C) The United Front's development, sources of support, and agenda highlight why President Karzai opposes formalizing political parties as part of the electoral system at this point. He argues that, until Afghan political culture has moved beyond the legacy of inter-ethnic and warlord-based conflict to more normal issue-based alignments, parties will inevitably be used to maintain and consolidate the influence of the old groupings. He understands that Afghanistan's fragile institutions and newly-emerging groupings are too weak to withstand these pressures. Karzai's own aversion to taking advice from or making compromises with opposition groups, coupled with his natural inclination for making deals with individual power-brokers, further complicates Afghanistan's progress toward a system where laws and institutions play as large a role as personalities and raw power in the political process. The United Front is, for the time being, a coarse and shaky alliance of old jihadists and marginal figures, encouraged and supported by external interests. Its influence points as much to the weakness of the political system as to its own inherent strengths.

WOOD